

how we are going to handle the policy of our armed services.

Today, instead of pulling this bill for gun liability or some other extraneous issue, they are doing it with filibustering. They have more votes than we have. They control what happens on the floor most of the time, and they are not letting us vote on this amendment. The majority doesn't want to embarrass the White House, so they are content to sit on their hands and have the Iraqi Government over there talking about granting amnesty to those who kill Americans.

The President said he looked Prime Minister al-Maliki in the eye and said he is OK, "I looked him in the eye." Well, I hope he saw in that eye the fact that this man was willing to grant amnesty to Iraqis who killed Americans. It is not an eye that I think the American people think is appropriate—amnesty for the killers of American troops. But it appears that the majority is willing to do this even if it jeopardizes our soldiers serving in Iraq by giving terrorists who want to attack them a get-out-of-jail-free card.

We can do a lot better than that. Let's put the excuses aside and do the right thing before another day passes. Let's join together and pass this amendment.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will be a period for the transaction of morning business for 30 minutes, with the first half of the time under the control of the Democratic leader or his designee and the second half of the time under the control of the majority leader or his designee.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, under morning business, are the Democrats recognized at this moment?

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Yes. The Democrats have the first 15 minutes, with 14½ minutes remaining.

MINIMUM WAGE AMENDMENT

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, later this week, we are going to debate the Department of Defense authorization bill. It is a very important bill. It also is one of the few times during the course of the year where we actually have a chance to offer amendments on very important issues. Most bills that come to the floor are fairly restrictive in terms of the procedures of the Senate. They limit what you can say and what you can address and the amendments that can be offered.

On this authorization bill, in the words of the Senate, precloture you can offer quite a few different amendments, and many will address issues that don't relate directly to the Department of Defense. There is one Senator KENNEDY will bring to the floor this week that he has been offering repeatedly and one that we should take up very quickly; that is, the question of the minimum wage in America today.

Senator KENNEDY's amendment would raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour in three steps over a period of several years—\$5.85 shortly after enactment, \$6.55 a year later, and then \$7.25 a year after that. Increasing the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour would benefit 6½ million Americans, 60 percent of whom are women. These are people by and large who are in very low-paying jobs and are trying to raise children, trying to make ends meet under extremely difficult circumstances.

The current minimum wage was enacted in 1997 at \$5.15 an hour, which is barely \$10,000 a year in gross wages, total wages. I cannot imagine a family struggling to survive that could make it on \$10,000 a year. As a result, many people are forced to work more than one job in minimum wage. Many are forced to turn to pantries and soup kitchens to supplement the income for their families. Imagine, if you will, the stress most Americans feel working 40 hours a week, trying to keep up with their kids and trying to spend a little time with them, enjoying life with them on weekends, and then make that 40-hour week a 60-hour week and figure out how it would be, particularly if you are a single parent doing your level best to raise a good child.

As this Congress has ignored the minimum wage for 9 years, we have said to these struggling families and parents: We are going to make the burden more difficult for you. Even though you get up every morning and go to work, which we applaud, we are not going to reward you for that. We are going to make it more difficult for you to keep your family together.

Since Congress last increased the minimum wage in 1997 to \$5.15 an hour, the real value of that wage has gone down 20 percent, which basically means the cost of living keeps going up while the minimum wage has been stuck at \$5.15. Minimum wage workers have already lost all of the gains that were enacted in 1996 and 1997, when we last raised the minimum wage. It is amazing to me that the minimum wage has become a partisan football in the Congress. There was a time when Republican Presidents would waste no time increasing the minimum wage, and Republican Congresses would follow suit, understanding that this is very basic to the question of economic justice in America; that if the poorest among us don't receive enough money for going to work, it causes extreme hardship on them.

The minimum wage, once created by President Roosevelt, has been each

year, through each administration, extended. Now for 9 years we have done nothing, leaving the minimum wage workers in very difficult circumstances. If we pass Senator KENNEDY's amendment—and I hope we do—to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, it will mean \$4,400 more a year for these families. That is significant. When you look at the average low-income family, they would be able to buy 15 months' worth of groceries; pay 19 months of utility bills, which have gone up dramatically since we last raised the minimum wage; pay 8 months of rent; over 2 years of health care for the basic low-income family; 20 months of childcare; 30 months of college tuition at a public 2-year college.

Think about that difference. A low-income mother, a single mother, raising children now might be able to afford good daycare for her children so she has peace of mind when she goes to work, knowing the kids are in safe hands. I have visited with families, and if they are not lucky enough to have a mother or a grandmother who will step in, some try to find a neighbor who will, and that is not always the best care. That has to be a source of great concern to every parent facing that possibility.

I believe there is a direct correlation between the failure to raise the minimum wage and a dramatic increase in the number of Americans living in poverty.

We used to talk about this issue. This used to be an issue which was debated on the floor of the Congress, about how many people were poor in America. We believed—and still do—that this great land of opportunity should offer opportunity to the poorest among us. Yet what we have seen is that the number of poor people has been growing dramatically over the last several years, while those who are well off are even better off. So the poor are truly poorer, and the rich are getting richer.

If you look at America as a system of laws that reflect an American family, how can we afford to leave people behind? I don't think we can. Thirty-seven million Americans currently live in poverty. That is more than 10 percent of America. Thirteen million of those are children. Among full-time, year-round workers, poverty has increased by 50 percent since the late 1970s. There was a time when we cared about those numbers. There was a time when President Reagan suggested changing the Tax Code to put in an earned-income tax credit to give the poorest families a helping hand. Of course, we created programs such as food stamps, WIC, and other programs for those low-income categories. There was a time when both political parties cared about the issue of poverty. Today, we don't discuss it. I don't know why. I believe we should.

Minimum wage employees working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, earn \$10,700 a year. That is \$6,000 below the